

Sara Mitcho, "'Truth' in the Age of Trump," *Lateral* 6.2 (2017).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L6.2.7>

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Issue 6.2 (Winter 2017) – Not a Trump Issue

“Truth” in the Age of Trump

Sara Mitcho

ABSTRACT Cultural studies scholars have a long history of problematizing the concept of truth. Today, however, many on the left have turned to the tactic of calling out Trump's lies, enumerating them, fact-checking them, and countering them with contrary evidence. While well-intentioned, dependence on calls for fact-checking and slogans that proclaim allegiance to science without acknowledging the cultural and social factors that affect knowledge production risks reifying some of the problems that early cultural studies scholars rightly highlighted. This essay argues, ultimately, that cultural studies scholars, activists, teachers, and critical theorists should resist the urge to set down the tools of critical theory but instead to apply them with abandon to Trump, his policies, and, perhaps most importantly, to ourselves.

Cultural studies scholars have a long history of problematizing the concept of truth by critiquing positivism and objectivity, and outlining the dangers of an uncritical reliance on Enlightenment-inspired rationality. Some might argue, in fact, that at the very core of cultural studies' critique of the status quo is the idea that the knowledge we produce is influenced by our subject position and embedded in culture and the material historical conjuncture in which we live and work. The concept of a singular objective Truth is all but impossible to sustain under such circumstances. However, as today's historical conjuncture includes Donald Trump's presidency, many on the left have turned to the tactic of calling out Trump's lies, enumerating them, fact-checking them, and countering them with contrary evidence in an effort to resist Trump's agenda and policies. Such tactics seem more than logical in the face of the president's steady stream of lies and "alternative facts" designed to justify his agenda. While well-intentioned, however, dependence on calls for fact-checking and slogans that proclaim allegiance to science without so much as a nod to the cultural and social factors that color the fraught process of knowledge production risks reifying some of the very problems that even the earliest of cultural studies scholars have highlighted. This essay begins to grapple with the question of what we are to do with this tension, the tension between the critical work of critiquing positivism and objectivity and the desire to call out Trump and his seeming barrage of bald-faced lies and efforts to gaslight the public. The essay represents a call, ultimately, for cultural studies scholars, activists, teachers, and critical theorists to resist the urge to set down the tools of critical theory but instead to apply them with abandon to Trump, his policies, and, perhaps most importantly, to ourselves.

Despite a long history of debates about precisely what cultural studies is and what it should and will be in the future, few would deny that among the concepts central to the field is power. In making visible various intersecting systems of power, including ideology, the political economy, and norms related to gender, sexuality, and race, we begin to complicate the notion that one can objectively observe an object and apply reason and the scientific method to discern the Truth about that object. Embedded in a particular moment in history and influenced by our positionality, culture, and social context, the knowledge we produce is informed by what we think we already know about the world. While such notions are the bread and butter of a critical theorist or cultural studies

scholar, this is not the case for skeptical colleagues and friends and, importantly, students who might grapple with what seems to be an affront to the methodologies they are learning in other courses.

Students wrestling with the critique of positivism and objectivity might conclude that such critiques amount to the idea that “everything is subjective” or that “it just depends on your opinion.” In such cases, distinguishing between the relativism and imaginary thinking that critical theorists are sometimes accused of and a real need to account for how the cultural, social, and historical context and one’s social identity and positionality influence how that person thinks about a particular object or phenomenon is essential. Ironically, the concept of hegemony simultaneously makes this task easier to explain by labeling the process by which a particular dominant view of the world becomes common sense, and more difficult as its very presence makes it hard for students to see their way around it.

Indeed, students are not the only ones who may be confused or critical about cultural studies practitioners’ critique of positivism and objectivity. The Sokal Affair of 1996 is a possible case in point. This is, of course, the famous case where physicist Alan Sokal submitted and successfully published a fake article in the journal *Social Text*, in which he made dubious arguments that wove together scientific language and rhetoric about social constructionism to demonstrate what he saw as a problematic trend among postmodernists and cultural studies scholars of accepting any argument that seemed to justify their political position regardless of its rigor. Sokal saw the publication of his article as proof that these scholars on the left were willing to accept arguments that were divorced from truth and empirical facts. In explaining his decision to submit the hoax article and allow for its publication more than twenty years ago, Sokal lamented the fact that the Left (with which he himself identified) had seemingly severed its ties with science:

For most of the past two centuries, the Left has been identified with science and against obscurantism; we have believed that rational thought and the fearless analysis of objective reality (both natural and social) are incisive tools for combating the mystifications promoted by the powerful—not to mention being desirable human ends in their own right. The recent turn of many “progressive” or “leftist” academic humanists and social scientists toward one or another form of epistemic relativism betrays this worthy heritage and undermines the already fragile prospects for progressive social critique. Theorizing about “the social construction of reality” won’t help us find an effective treatment for AIDS or devise strategies for preventing global warming. Nor can we combat false ideas in history, sociology, economics and politics if we reject the notions of truth and falsity.¹

In today’s context of a seemingly endless flow of misinformation from Donald Trump and his administration in which the fight against global warming, medical advances like vaccinations long accepted as effective, knowledge about women’s reproductive health, and other scientific developments seem at risk, Sokal’s critique might begin to look appealing to both us and our students. In the face of the daily storm of lies and active efforts to obscure or reduce access to scientific data, in the face of policy proposals seemingly divorced from reality that pose threats to marginalized populations throughout the country, a critical approach can feel like a luxury.

And indeed, some on the left—a group that may include some of our students and ourselves—have begun adopting slogans that perhaps unwittingly reflect a positivist view of science. Slogans on signs and t-shirts proclaim that “science is not a liberal conspiracy” and “science is real.” Such pronouncements echo Hillary Clinton’s declaration during her acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention: “I believe in science.”

Organizers estimated that, in April of 2017, more than a million people participated in the March for Science in Washington, DC and in sister marches around the world to profess their support for “the need to respect and encourage research that gives us insight into the world.”² March organizers explained on their website that

People who value science have remained silent for far too long in the face of policies that ignore scientific evidence and endanger both human life and the future of our world. New policies threaten to further restrict scientists’ ability to research and communicate their findings. We face a possible future where people not only ignore scientific evidence, but seek to eliminate it entirely. Staying silent is a luxury that we can no longer afford. We must stand together and support science.³

Our gravitation toward such ideas, as well as pithy slogans and clever protest t-shirts, and exasperated declarations that Trump is completely divorced from reality are fueled, in part, by our disbelief at the extent to which Trump and his associates appear to ignore scientific maxims that have long ago been accepted as fact. We find ourselves emboldened to declare that, in this complex world, surely we can at least agree that vaccinations are helpful, that climate change is real, that *science itself is real* and its data *materially compelling*.

But we would do well to check this impulse against the equally real benefits of a critical skepticism of positivism and the notion of objectivity. We would do well to slow down and avoid statements that suggest that science is somehow a vessel filled with pure objective knowledge ready to be discovered and that scientific practice is simply the extraction of this knowledge from the vessel. Such an idea flies in the face of the work of any number of critical theorists, postmodernists, feminist theorists, and other cultural studies scholars. Similarly, overemphasis on simply listing facts or listing Trump’s lies does not guard against a situation where Trump or one of his colleagues cites nothing but verifiable facts to support a harmful policy. While naming Trump’s lies is important, so is tracing the relationships of power at play and the harmful consequences of his actions. This is the kind of nuanced analysis cultural studies facilitates.

Have we so quickly forgotten the insights of theorists like Anne Fausto-Sterling, for one, who has so adeptly described social and cultural influences on the knowledge scientists produce about gender and sexuality,⁴ or Donna Haraway, who has spent a career describing the fraught relationship between science and the social world? These are simply two examples from among feminist theorists; there are no doubt many more who have teased out and particularized the ways in which social, cultural, and historical factors—and, importantly, relationships of power—have influenced the kind of knowledge science produces. Have we forgotten scientific theories about male and female brains, about how homosexuality might be cured? We must also, of course, consider those situations where uneven relationships of power have led to justifications of treating marginalized individuals as specimens from which we might draw evidence in the name of advancing science. The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment and the case of Henrietta Lacks are but two well-known examples of this phenomenon.

These are precisely the kinds of examples that might be cited in helping students understand the dangers of ignoring the influence of hegemony and positionality on knowledge production. While exploiting marginalized populations in the name of advancing scientific research (as in the case of the Tuskegee experiment and Henrietta Lacks) is not the same as producing supposedly objective theories that reflect societal beliefs, both illustrate the relationship between power and knowledge production. When scientists and other thinkers are situated in a particular position of power and are

influenced by what they think they already know when employing so-called objective scientific methods, they risk producing—and have produced—theories about the world that are more reflective of their positionality and hegemonic cultural beliefs than of actual phenomena. A deep belief in positivist science and objectivity has lent these theories credibility. It is crucial, therefore, that we teach our students to both understand the value of natural science—in helping describe the effects and progression of climate change, refuting claims about the ill effects of vaccinations, supporting women’s health, and so forth—while taking account of power and avoiding a positivist view of science in the name of efficiency and expediency. It’s equally crucial that we employ such a nuanced approach in our own activism and scholarship.

One might venture to assert that failing to make these distinctions may actually risk missing an opportunity to demonstrate how Trump and his associates are actually the ones in the business of constructing their own reality. In other words, while those working in academic fields like cultural studies are so often victims of the critique that their work is based on a slippery foundation untethered to objective facts or that it represents a dangerous brand of relativism, we might counter that criticism not only with a clear articulation of our understanding of the process of knowledge production but also by offering Trump as an example of someone who truly is engaging in a kind of imaginary thinking disconnected from reality. For our students and for others, we might distinguish between our consideration of hegemony and positionality and Trump’s practice of simply creating his own reality. We might take great pleasure, in fact, in distinguishing between useful critiques of objectivity, sometimes misinterpreted as the idea that “everything is subjective,” and Trump’s pronouncements that something is true simply because helps him advance his agenda, which is actually closer to students’ and others’ false view of our critiques of positivism. Or could it be, perhaps, that rather than standing in contrast to critical theory, Trump and his colleagues are actually *employing* it in their very own assault on objectivity?

A recent *New York Times* article asked precisely this question in its provocative title, “Has Trump Stolen Philosophy’s Critical Tools?” Its author, Casey Williams, a literature PhD student, muses, “Trump’s playbook should be familiar to any student of critical theory and philosophy. It often feels like Trump has stolen our ideas and weaponized them.”⁵ Williams points to a 2004 article by Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?” in which the social theorist expresses a similar fear.⁶ Pointing to one Republican strategist’s proposed tactic of complicating the conversation about global warming by emphasizing the “lack of scientific certainty,” Latour recounts his own role in problematizing the presence of objective scientific truth: “I myself have spent some time in the past trying to show “*the lack of scientific certainty*” inherent in the construction of facts. [. . .] But I did not exactly aim at fooling the public by obscuring the certainty of a closed argument—or did I? After all, I have been accused of just that sin. Still, I’d like to believe that, on the contrary, I intended to *emancipate* the public from prematurely naturalized objectified facts.” Latour worries that, if, as he fears, he was “foolishly mistaken,” “the danger would no longer be coming from an excessive confidence in ideological arguments posturing as matters of fact—as we have learned to combat so efficiently in the past—but from an excessive *distrust* of good matters of fact disguised as bad ideological biases!” Latour asks, “While we spent years trying to detect the real prejudices hidden behind the appearance of objective statements, do we now have to reveal the real objective and incontrovertible facts hidden behind the *illusion* of prejudices?”⁷

Despite anxiety from both Williams and Latour that perhaps critical theorists’ critique of truth and objectivity has been co-opted by those on the right (or by Trump), we must ultimately reject this idea. The notion that Trump has stolen the tools of critical theory

feeds into the logic that the critique of positivism and objectivity represents *carte blanche* to invent facts out of whole cloth. This is not the case. Williams ultimately makes precisely this point. He distinguishes between the idea that “[t]ruth is not found, but made, and making truth means exercising power” and “[t]he reductive version” that “[f]act is fiction, and anything goes.” The latter, Williams argues, is the “version of critical social theory that the populist right has seized on and that Trump has made into a powerful weapon.” Williams argues that we should not abandon critical theory: “Even in a ‘post-truth era,’ a critical attitude allows us to question dominant systems of thought, whether they derive authority from an appearance of neutrality, objectivity or inevitability or from a more Trumpian appeal to alternative facts that dispense with empirical evidence.”⁸

Likewise, Latour does not suggest that we completely abandon critiques of objectivity. “I am not trying to reverse course,” he admits.⁹ But Latour does take issue with the manner in which critical theorists, including himself, have made their critiques. In arguing that we shift our focus from “matters of fact” to “matters of concern,” turning our attention from “objects” to “things,” Latour points to a kind of smugness with which critical theorists have deployed their critiques, critiques that inadvertently employ positivism themselves and that are constructed so as to ensure success:

You are always right! When naïve believers are clinging forcefully to their objects, claiming that they are made to do things because of their gods, their poetry, their cherished objects, you can turn all of those attachments into so many fetishes and humiliate all the believers by showing that it is nothing but their own projection, that you, yes you alone, can see. But as soon as naïve believers are thus inflated by some belief in their own importance, in their own projective capacity, you strike them by a second uppercut and humiliate them again, this time by showing that, whatever they think, their behavior is entirely determined by the action of powerful causalities coming from objective reality they don’t see, but that you, yes you, the never sleeping critic, alone can see. Isn’t this fabulous?¹⁰

While Donald Trump has not wielded the tools of critical theory, he has successfully leveraged very real anger and skepticism leveled at critical thinkers who may be offering useful critiques but who often do so with a certain level of smugness. It is, at least in part, this smugness, and not necessarily critical thought, to which skeptical audiences react. We would do well to pause before proudly announcing our location firmly on the higher ground as we look down on Trump and his supporters’ relativist claims and dangerous refutations of facts and expertise. Latour envisions a different kind of critic: “The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather. The critic is not the one who alternates haphazardly between antifetishism and positivism like the drunk iconoclast drawn by Goya, but the one for whom, if something is constructed, then it means it is fragile and thus in great need of care and caution.”¹¹ As Donna Haraway likewise noted, “We need the power of modern critical theories of how meanings and bodies get made, not in order to deny meaning and bodies, but in order to live in meanings and bodies that have a chance for a future.”¹²

The existence of the smug critic has perhaps contributed to what has recently been lamented by some on the left as the rejection by Trump and his supporters of experts, be it climatologists or legal scholars. And, in fact, in other circumstances, critical theorists have, in their own way, applauded the death of expertise. We have, in other circumstances, shared the delight in taking experts and their positivist thinking down a notch. We might, in fact, agree that “experts” deserve to be checked and questioned. But let us not forget

that we, too, are experts. And we are precisely the kind of smug experts Trump supporters reject. We, too, fall prey to anger at the audacity of being ignored.

So while it might feel good to point out that we are the ones doing the *right* kind of critique while Trump is just making stuff up, such a move only moves us closer to an emphasis on facts and a kind of blindness to our own positionality. While there is space, even among critical theorists, for criticizing Trump for inventing facts and accusing those on the left of the same, we get into tricky territory when this is our emphasis to the exclusion of the more careful work of tracing power relationships and studying the real and potential impact of Trump's presidency. One of the things cultural studies practitioners can offer is nuanced analysis of the relationships of power at play in any proposed policy and an understanding of the social totality surrounding each of Trump's actions. This totality includes ourselves and our coveted tools of critique.

We might look to Donna Haraway's work on situated knowledges for a useful model of how we might "have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects . . . and a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a 'real' world."¹³ Haraway's model escapes the potential for smugness that Latour worries about by recognizing that our accounts of the world are necessarily partial. As Haraway observes, "only partial perspective promises objective vision."¹⁴ In other words, each of us is situated in a particular position, each offering a particular incomplete view. Only in recognizing this can we hope to produce grounded knowledge. We cannot escape responsibility for our accounts, however, nor should we see all accounts as equally positioned. Haraway is just as dismissive of relativism as she is of "totalizing versions of claims to scientific authority." "Relativism," Haraway argues, "is a way of being nowhere while claiming to be everywhere equally. The 'equality' of positioning is a denial of responsibility and critical enquiry."¹⁵ Thus, Haraway sees both claims to total objectivity and relativism as dodging responsibility. In doing so, she brings our attention to the need to account for our positionality and to be responsible for our accounts of the world.

With the partial perspective of situated knowledges, "we might," argues Haraway, "become answerable for what we learn how to see."¹⁶ Haraway also implores us to not simply stop at "acknowledged and self-critical partiality" but to also actively seek out perspectives that might provide "knowledge potent for constructing worlds less organized by axes of domination."¹⁷ Thus, we might maintain our rejection of total objectivity and, with it, the idea that there exists a universal Truth. But we can still account for the "real" world and call out lies and deception. We can do this by understanding that all views, including our own, are partial, but not unaccountable, sidestepping relativism by accounting for both position and power and by tracing the contours of the context in which knowledge making occurs.

In responding to Trump, it is crucial to consider not just the current conjuncture, but the long term effects of the anti-Trump movement as well as the lasting impact of our approach to scholarship, activism, and teaching during the Trump administration. While we may be tempted in this moment to lean on fact-checking and to gravitate toward pithy slogans that declare an allegiance to science and to take comfort in the promise of an objective body of knowledge that can single-handedly shut down Trump with its "truth," we have to remain committed to the messiness of the practice of cultural studies and critical theory. Yes, we should call out Trump for his lies. But we should also acknowledge to our students, colleagues, and fellow activists that while we do not endorse a relativist world where "it's all subjective," we do insist on recognizing and examining the fraught process of knowledge production. Importantly, we must include ourselves and our coveted objects, including our favorite pet theories, among the things that need to be

interrogated in such endeavors lest we inadvertently reproduce a new kind of positivist thinking wherein we endorse *our* objectivity and *our* truth rather than problematizing the concepts altogether. We must avoid becoming the smug critic and invite conversation rather than seeking to foreclose it. Understanding that all accounts of the world are partial, situated, and embedded in a context of power, we must critique totalizing views and relativism while holding ourselves and others responsible for our accounts. The long-term viability of our field and our activism—and our capacity for navigating “truth” in the Trump era—depend on it.

Notes

1. Alan D. Sokal, “A Physicist Experiments with Cultural Studies,” April 15, 1996, 4-5, http://www.physics.nyu.edu/sokal/lingua_franca_v4.pdf. ↗
2. “About Us: Our Mission,” March for Science, <https://www.marchforscience.com/mission/>. ↗
3. “About Us: Our Mission.” ↗
4. See, for example, Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 2000). ↗
5. Casey Williams, “Has Trump Stolen Philosophy’s Critical Tools?,” *The New York Times*, April 17, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/17/opinion/has-trump-stolen-philosophys-critical-tools.html>. ↗
6. Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (Winter 2004): 225–48. ↗
7. Latour, “Why Has Critique,” 226–27. ↗
8. Williams, “Has Trump Stolen Philosophy’s Critical Tools?” ↗
9. Latour, “Why Has Critique,” 231. ↗
10. Latour, “Why Has Critique,” 239. ↗
11. Latour, “Why Has Critique,” 246. ↗
12. Donna J. Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 187. ↗
13. Haraway, “Situated Knowledges,” 187. ↗
14. Haraway, “Situated Knowledges,” 190. ↗
15. Haraway, “Situated Knowledges,” 191. ↗
16. Haraway, “Situated Knowledges,” 190. ↗
17. Haraway, “Situated Knowledges,” 192. ↗

 [Bio](#)



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ISSN 2469-4053